

CIA Nicaragua role focus of Hill hassle

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The administration and congressional Democrats squared off yesterday over the legality of alleged CIA covert operations supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua.

Several congressmen said the administration was breaking at least the spirit of the so-called Boland Amendment supposedly prohibiting such actions against the Nicaraguan government, and a House subcommittee proposed a new law tightening up the amendments.

But four top administration officials went before congressional committees and the public to deny any U.S. laws were being broken. At the same time, they refused to acknowledge publicly the existence of the not-so-secret covert operations.

CIA Director William Casey assured the Senate Intelligence Committee in secret session that the law was not being broken; U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick said the United States has a "moral right" to send military and economic aid to groups that may be attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government; Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the law was not being violated; and Secretary of State George Shultz attacked those he said were undermining the nation's ability to provide a security shield to America's friends in Central America.

"As far as I know, there is no violation of the Boland Amendment," Shultz said at a press conference yesterday. "The moves being made (yesterday's congressional action) that seem to be designed to prevent us from continuing to support our friends in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America, in their effort to provide a military security shield so that they can go forward with the process of democracy.... I think this is undermining our ability to provide that shield, and it is a bad mistake."

Kirkpatrick, speaking on CBS television, said: "Do I think the United States should protect the government of Nicaragua against the anger of its own people? No, I don't think so. I think we have a moral right.... to support the Afghan freedom fighters. The Soviets and Cubans are supporting the disintegration of virtually all governments in Central America.... I think we have a moral right to do that, and whether it's politically prudent or wise in a given situation is another question."

Commenting on Kirkpatrick's statements, Shultz said that America's immediate problem with Nicaragua is "the undoubtedly use of Nicaragua as a base from which arms flow, largely through Cuba to Nicaragua, and then to El Salvador. It's the 'export of revolution without frontiers,' I think is the phrase. That is the heart of the difficulty with which we are trying to cope."

In testimony yesterday, Enders refused to be drawn by Sens. John Glenn, D-Ohio, Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., and Paul Tsongas, D-Mass., into discussing U.S. support for anti-Sandinista guerrillas, but he described in detail the opposition groups and circumstances within Nicaragua that he said show the extent of opposition.

Enders said the United States has attempted three times to get the Nicaraguan government into a dialogue with its neighbors to establish security for the region. But since its founding in 1979, the Nicaraguan army has grown to four times the size of the army under

Somoza, and eight times as strong. Enders said the United States is trying to establish regional negotiations a fourth time, but "the Sandinistas have made their contempt for genuine dialogue — for real negotiation — quite clear."

Enders pointedly referred to the specific language of the Boland Amendment to refute Tsongas' argument that the law was being broken by CIA operations. He said the amendment calls for U.S. money not to be used for military aid to any non-governmental group "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua."

He emphasized the words "for the purpose of," implying that whatever U.S. aid may be given to the guerrillas it was not for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

Rep. Michael Barnes, D-Md., chairman of the House Western Hemisphere subcommittee, yesterday pushed through a proposed revision in that language that changes "for the purpose of" to "has the effect of supporting the overthrow of the government of Nicaragua." His amendment is to be considered by the House Foreign Affairs Committee next week.